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HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 528th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 6 October 1998, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. RODRIGUEZ CEDEÑO (Venezuela)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND BURDEN-SHARING IN ALL ITS ASPECTS: NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR REFUGEES (agenda item 4) (A/AC.96/904) (continued)

1. Ms. ANDERSON (Ireland) said that the report of the High Commissioner on her visit to Kosovo and that of the Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator on his visit to the Great Lakes region offered compelling evidence of the need for linkage between political and humanitarian action, for, in many instances, too great a burden of responsibility had been shifted to the shoulders of the humanitarian community. As the context of humanitarian action became more problematic, financial resources were diminishing and the political consensus on key aspects of protection appeared to be fragmenting. Any discussion of burden-sharing must begin with a clear acknowledgement of the contribution to protection made by those developing countries which hosted large displaced populations. Their needs and circumstances had to be a key focus of the deliberations of the Executive Committee. Developing countries were fully entitled to expect help in coping and burden-sharing was indeed extremely important in reinforcing the capacity of host countries to maintain generous asylum policies. At the same time, it could not become a prerequisite for the fulfilment of a State's international protection obligations.

2. The number of refugees living in Ireland was low compared with many of its partners in the European Union, as well as in many other countries. A particular characteristic of the situation in Ireland had been the need to cope with sudden changes in refugee numbers. Perhaps because of Ireland's island status, the numbers of those seeking asylum had traditionally been relatively small. However, the growth rate in asylum applications in Ireland over the past four years had been the highest in the European Union and the number of applications in 1997, expressed as a percentage of the national population, was one of the highest in the European Union. Responding to such a significant change in circumstances had posed many challenges and Ireland was now confronting the problems that many of the more traditional host countries had grappled with for a long time. Her Government frankly admitted that there had been problems and that it still had a distance to travel in finding the answers. Several months previously, it had been decided to fund a UNHCR staff member to come to Dublin and work closely with Irish officials dealing with the refugee influx. That arrangement had proven extremely helpful.

3. In recent years, Ireland had maintained a steady upward increase in its funding of UNHCR. In 1997, its overall contribution had increased by 38 per cent over the previous year. In 1998, to date, contributions had increased by a further 21 per cent and her Government hoped to maintain that pattern.

4. With regard to the issues raised in the report of the Board of Auditors, mistakes or oversights, where they had occurred, needed to be corrected. It would be absolutely wrong, however, if an exaggerated focus on those issues were to blunt the central message that UNHCR urgently needed to strengthen the financial support of member States in order to fulfil its mandate. Imbalances in funding programmes constituted another area of concern. UNHCR's

requirements in Kosovo seemed reasonably well met, while less visible programmes in West Africa were seriously underfunded. The response to refugee crises was too often partial and uneven and the consequent dilemmas for humanitarian actors were often great. She was pleased to have been able to inform the High Commissioner that the Irish authorities had recently made significant new contributions to UNHCR activities in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, the Niger and Somalia.

5. The term "burden-sharing" had of course become well established in the lexicon of humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, the UNHCR television spot recalled the richness of the contribution made by so many refugees in their countries of asylum. The word "burden" might well convey how refugees were seen in some societies, but it hardly did justice to how they should be seen. In the refugee context, at least, the term "responsibility-sharing" should be used as much as possible.

6. Ms. KUNADI (India) said that part IV of Executive Committee conclusion No. 22 (XXXII) of 1981 on the protection of asylum-seekers in situations of large-scale influx had elucidated the concept of burden-sharing with considerable clarity and her Government was disappointed that that issue had not been explored at greater length in the High Commissioner's paper on international solidarity and burden-sharing (A/AC.96/904). However, the very fact that a debate on that theme was being renewed in the Executive Committee was a welcome step towards a return to the enlightened approach the Committee had adopted in 1981. She regarded international solidarity and burden-sharing as multifaceted concepts which went beyond the mere provision of resources. Neither the duty to receive refugees nor the real costs associated with their arrival were fairly apportioned across the world. The distribution of State responsibility towards refugees was based on accidents of geography and the relative ability of States to control their borders. The entire system survived tenuously on undependable funding, which in turn circumscribed promises of cooperation. An international system which did not address those concerns adequately could not be sustained in the long run.

7. It was predominantly developing countries that were countries of origin and of asylum. Host developing countries, which put at risk their fragile environment, economy and social fabric to provide refuge to millions, were in reality the largest "donors". Meeting the needs of societies which produced as well as hosted the vast majority of refugees must therefore move to the forefront of the refugee agenda. It was also essential systematically to assess the economic and social impact of massive refugee populations and to identify ways and means to minimize that impact. The prevention of humanitarian crises through investment in long-term sustainable development in countries of origin was the most cost-effective approach available to the international community. Given the decline in official development assistance and shortfalls in funding for humanitarian activities, renewed efforts were needed to ensure that developing countries which generated as well as received refugee outflows were provided substantial and effective assistance by the international community. UNHCR's capacity to carry out its mandated functions must also be strengthened.

8. The international community must correct all trends that hindered refugee protection and seek to transfer the burden onto other regions of the

world. Burden-sharing did not mean that developed countries could meet their obligations only by assisting developing countries; it also implied that developed countries had to accept their responsibilities under international refugee law and refrain from unilateral practices and derogations that could contribute to a complete collapse of the international regime. She was surprised and dismayed that, as the world celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, commitment to article 14 of that instrument was being steadily eroded.

9. With regard to the recent death of an asylum-seeker in the process of forcible deportation, India agreed that abuse of the asylum process should not be condoned and that it was legitimate for States to deport asylum-seekers who were adjudged as not in need of protection through an open, free and fair process which was subject to independent judicial review. Such returns must, however, be undertaken with full respect for the dignity of the persons concerned and their rights.

10. Ms. BAUTISTA (Philippines) said that, as the Asian continent hosted a very large group of refugees, numbering about 4.8 million, her Government fully recognized the burden of large influxes of refugees, particularly in the developing countries. She encouraged other States that had not yet done so to accede to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. On the national front, she was pleased to announce that her Government had promulgated Department of Justice Order No. 94, entitled "Establishing a Procedure for Processing Applications for the Grant of Refugee Status". That was in accordance with article 36 of the 1951 Convention, requiring States and parties to communicate to the Secretary-General the laws and regulations which could be adopted to ensure the application of the Convention.

11. While burden-sharing was borne primarily at the national level, regional and international burden-sharing should likewise be strengthened in order to achieve an integrated and comprehensive strategy based on protection, solutions and prevention. The Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) adopted in 1989 by the UNHCR-sponsored International Conference on Indochinese Refugees was a good example of the regional approach to resolving refugee problems; her Government had been a strong supporter of CPA. The Philippines fully agreed that the "sharing of responsibilities towards people uprooted by conflict and persecution is the most significant aspect of burden-sharing". Although refugee protection was primarily the responsibility of States, it was best achieved through effective cocperation among and between all States and UNHCR, with the support of the relevant international organizations and other relevant players, in a spirit of international solidarity. In the search for durable solutions, the special needs of refugee women and children, as well as the elderly and sick refugees, particularly in times of war and its aftermath, should not be forgotten.

12. Mr. MCHOMVU (United Republic of Tanzania) said that, as a major country of asylum in a region of great turbulence, Tanzania knew only too well the tremendous burden which countries of asylum had to put up with when hosting large influxes of refugees, such as those occurring in the Great Lakes region. Burden-sharing found expression in many of the major refugee instruments, including the 1951 Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the

Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. While that concept was well established and recognized in theory, it was nonetheless a sad reality that the hiatus between theory and practice was very wide. As a result, the countries of asylum were to a large extent left to bear the brunt of the burden of hosting the refugees they admitted into their territories. That was particularly true in respect of long-standing refugee situations and, since there was no mechanism to apportion the sharing of the burden within the international community, whatever resources that were made available to the countries of asylum remained a matter of charity, left to the discretion of individual States. At times, the recipient countries ended up being blamed by a variety of pressure groups and organizations, some of which benefited from refugee situations.

13. His Government very much appreciated the response of the international community to the plight of refugees. Nevertheless, for poor developing countries, hosting refugees had now become a much heavier and more painful burden than ever before. In situations of ethnic conflict, which now seemed to be the norm rather than the exception, protecting refugees brought new risks to national security and promoted tension between States as a result of the close link between refugee outflows and armed conflicts.

14. The provision of protection in situations of mass influxes also resulted in extensive damage to the environment and infrastructure. In the case of Tanzania, the army had had to be deployed along parts of the border so as to ensure national security and territorial integrity, as well as the protection of refugee camps from attacks and infiltration from hostile quarters. In the Great Lakes region, there had been a monumental failure on the part of the international community to live up to expectations of solidarity and burden-sharing by failing to help separate armed elements from genuine refugees. The fruit of that failure was now being reaped with the continuing instability that threatened to engulf the whole of the Great Lakes and Central African regions. There was an urgent need for the international community to play its part in breaking the vicious circle of violence, if the hostilities were to be contained and those concerned with that state of affairs brought to their senses.

15. One of the lessons to be learned from the debacle of 1994 was that, where there was militarization of refugee camps, there was a need for the international community to be involved in ensuring the civilian character of the camps. Expecting the recipient countries to do that job amounted to burden-shifting and was clearly beyond the call of duty of host nations.

16. In those situations, there was also a need for the international community to address the root causes of refugee flows and to assist in the search for solutions to such conflicts as a way of obviating refugee outflows. Part of the measures taken could include checking on arms trafficking as a way of containing conflicts; that would require concerted action involving countries of asylum and the international community at large. Recipient countries must do what was in their power to check that arms did not reach belligerents, while those who produced and traded in arms should ensure that weapons did not proliferate in fragile situations and aggravate tensions in areas prone to refugee outflows. The profit motive must not be allowed to continue wreaking havoc on society. Where mines had been planted, the

international community should also be involved in removing them as a way of facilitating returns in safety and dignity. It was necessary for all those involved to play their part, including those who had planted the mines in the first place.

17. Unfortunately, there was a widespread, but mistaken, belief among the affluent and influential members of the international community that burden-sharing was restricted to the provision of funds for the care and maintenance of refugees. They would like to see the funds they donated to the cause of refugees being spent only on the acquisition of material things and for putting up facilities for refugees. Assisting the poor members of the local community was, however, a good investment in ensuring continued willingness by the community to accept refugees. Those who were critical of attempts to assist local populations were forgetting that, in reality, well before the international community had mobilized assistance for refugees, it was the local population in the countries of asylum that had cushioned the presence of refugees, sharing with them their meagre resources and providing them with initial care and sustenance. They did so willingly and without expecting anything in return and they also bore the impact of the presence of refugees after their departure.

18. International solidarity and burden-sharing did not end with the provision of protection for refugees in camps and went beyond the provision of relief and humanitarian assistance. It was equally important to ensure that the refugees achieved a basic level of livable conditions. The international community must ensure that adequate and timely relief was provided to refugees and at the same time take account of the needs of recipient countries.

19. It was unfortunate that the momentum of the Second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa and its Programme of Action seemed to have been forgotten and lost. Nonetheless, the basic tenets underlying that Conference remained largely as valid as they had been in 1981. The international community should fund fully voluntary returns. Unfortunately, the lack of financial resources had often undermined repatriation efforts even in those instances where such a solution seemed viable. It was also necessary to provide assistance to countries of origin that welcomed back returnees as a way of consolidating the return process and ensuring that return was durable. Donor States should show flexibility in the return process. They must realize that UNHCR could not simply dump refugees in their countries of origin and claim that they had solved the problem.

20. Tanzania did not share the view that, in present-day circumstances, it was feasible or even desirable to encourage local integration of refugees, owing to the nature and large numbers of refugees involved. While that possibility could not be ruled out completely for some countries, it was not an option for other countries which were hosting large numbers of refugees. Much as Tanzania remained and would remain a country of immense traditional African hospitality, recent waves of refugees and their nature had put that legendary generosity to a test. Third-country resettlement offered a better chance as part of the solution to refugee problems.

21. Mr. SUNGAR (Turkey) said that population displacement continued to be a source of acute human suffering. The classical definition of a refugee

contained in the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees was no longer comprehensive. The link between internal or external armed conflicts and population displacement had become increasingly clear in the post-cold-war period and new categories of conflict-related displacement presented a serious challenge to UNHCR in terms of its protection and assistance mandate. However, the steady decline in recent years in the number of people requiring UNHCR assistance was an encouraging development, as was the UNHCR-assisted repatriation of some 3.1 million people in 1997.

22. He stressed the importance of flexibility and creativity in finding durable solutions to involuntary population displacements. Voluntary repatriation should continue to be the preferred solution, with UNHCR serving as a facilitator between the country of origin and the receiving country and as a simulator and guarantor among the refugee population. Where voluntary repatriation failed, third-country resettlement should remain an option, especially in cases where developing countries hosted large numbers of refugees.

23. The individual right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries was a sacred one. The States parties to the 1951 Convention had undertaken to refrain from returning refugees to territories where their life or freedom would be threatened and to admit refugees to their territories through a fair and effective procedure in cooperation with UNHCR. International solidarity and burden-sharing constituted another established principle embodied in the fourth preambular paragraph of the Convention and highlighted in a number of Executive Committee conclusions, particularly Conclusion No. 22 (XXXII) of 1981 and Conclusion No. 77 (XLVI) of 1995. It was not, however, a prerequisite for meeting fundamental protection obligations. In theory, refugee protection was primarily a State responsibility and States were obliged to open their frontiers for humanitarian reasons, regardless of the prevailing circumstances. But the precepts had not always been applicable in practice, particularly during the post-cold-war period.

24. By its nature, humanitarian action preceded political action and political solutions. But the parameters of the conflicts of the 1990s did not lend themselves to rapid political problem-solving. As a result, the main burden of transfrontier movements was borne by countries adjoining the conflict area, which were usually developing countries whose authorities often had to divert considerable resources and manpower to deal with the influx to the detriment of their development efforts. Large refugee populations could also have an adverse impact on the environment, generate social tensions or disrupt regional and international peace and security. It was deeply regrettable that the enormous burden placed on host countries did not always receive the attention it deserved from the rest of the world and that humanitarian action was often viewed as a substitute for political action.

25. Turkey had experienced the inadequacy of international solidarity and burden-sharing in 1991, when half a million people had entered the country from northern Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis. Some leading donors, who had previously persuaded the country to admit such groups with promises of assistance in sharing the burden, had proved reluctant to keep their word when

Turkey was faced with serious long-term economic, social, environmental and security problems. Instead of earning praise for its humanitarian action, Turkey had become the target of international criticism.

26. His country attached importance to all initiatives aimed at promoting regional dialogue and cooperation on refugee issues in a spirit of solidarity and burden-sharing. The Turkish Government supported the follow-up process to the Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returners in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States and welcomed the progress made in the Regional Consultation process involving 14 countries, including Turkey, in Central Asia, South West Asia and the Middle East (CASWAME) initiated by UNHCR in 1997.

27. It shared the fear, however, that regional burden-sharing arrangements might lead to the creation of regional blocs with separate refugee regimes. The idea of creating a safety belt in the vicinity of the "core of Europe" through the development of new concepts did nothing to promote the principle of international solidarity and burden-sharing. If put into practice, it could lead to an inequitable division of responsibility, with the periphery of the continent bearing the burden. It should also be borne in mind that any regional burden-sharing regime must be complementary to, not at the expense of, global burden-sharing efforts. Turkish Governments had always supported the establishment of a systematic and effective global burden-sharing mechanism. Though perhaps impracticable for the time being, the idea should be espoused as a long-term project for an efficient, equitable and consistent response to refugee situations. While burden-sharing might not be a prerequisite for asylum and protection, it was a sine qua non for an effective global asylum regime.

28. He commended UNHCR on its remarkable presence all over the world under the able leadership of the High Commissioner and pledged Turkey's continued support and cooperation for its work.

29. Mr. SOLÍS CÁMARA (Observer for Mexico), commending the High Commissioner on her re-election, said that the Mexican Government had been gradually developing a migration policy designed to ensure greater openness, the protection of human rights and solidarity with asylum-seekers. Five mechanisms for consultations on migration and consular protection had been established with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. In 1996, the General Population Act had been amended to make it more humanitarian and to provide for family integration. A Migrants' Documentation Scheme had been implemented to regularize the legal status of 50,000 Guatemalans who had been coming to south-eastern Mexico for decades to work as farm labourers. Half a million copies of the Spanish and English versions of the Human Rights Guidebook for Migrants had been distributed. Nine migrant protection groups had significantly reduced the incidence of criminal and abusive acts against migrants on both Mexican borders. Human rights training courses had been organized in cooperation with UNHCR and the Mexican National Commission on Human Rights for over 1,000 migration officials. The Programme of Support for Refugee Mothers involving Mexican Government bodies, the

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UNHCR had been launched. Moreover, Mexico continued to pursue its traditional asylum policy, both within the country and in its diplomatic missions abroad.

30. Over 40,000 Guatemalan refugees had been successfully repatriated, a figure that represented 75 per cent of the Guatemalan refugee population. Mexico, Guatemala and UNHCR planned to complete the process of repatriation of some 5,000 additional refugees within the next 10 months. The Government of Guatemala was to be commended for its vigorous efforts to facilitate the process.

31. As announced by the Government of Mexico at the forty-seventh session of the Executive Committee, an integration procedure had been initiated in 1996, under which all Guatemalan refugees could obtain migration documents, which enabled them to seek employment, move about freely within the country and change their residence if they so wished. Moreover, over 2,300 persons would have successfully completed the voluntary naturalization process by the end of 1998. The Socio-economic Integration Scheme, including housing, employment, education and health components, had been launched in 1998 on behalf of Guatemalan families who had decided to settle in Mexico.

32. Mexico counted on the continued support of the international community and the active involvement of UNHCR and the Guatemalan Government in order to provide for and assimilate the inhabitants of the over 100 remaining camps on the Mexico-Guatemala border. The settlements built in the States of Campeche and Quintana Roo would shortly be brought under municipal jurisdiction on the same basis as other Mexican towns and villages. Both land and dwellings would be transferred to their current Guatemalan occupants under a social credit scheme. With the support of the European Union, development programmes for both Guatemalans and their Mexican neighbours had been initiated in both States.

33. In June 1998, the Mexican Government had taken steps in the State of Chiapas to enable Guatemalan families to settle in the areas they currently inhabited if they so wished. Alternatively, refugees were free to move from Chiapas to Campeche or Quintana Roo, where the prospects for integration were better. The 2,909 families in Chiapas could therefore opt for voluntary repatriation, local integration or relocation to another State.

34. The Mexican authorities had given priority to the provision of educational facilities for school-age refugees. Refugee schools had been integrated into the formal education system where they enjoyed such benefits as free textbooks and qualified teachers. Secondary schools equipped with television education facilities already existed in Campeche and Quintana Roo and would shortly be established in Chiapas. Health services included free distribution of drugs, hospital care and vaccination and sanitation campaigns. Other public services had been improved. They included vocational training and support for commercial and economic activities.

35. The Guatemalan refugees were respected and admired by local Mexican communities as a hardworking and creative people who were deeply grateful to the host country.

36. Mexico invited interested member States of UNHCR to visit the states of Campeche, Chiapas and Quintana Roo in order to obtain a firsthand impression of a project that could probably be described as unique. It was to be hoped that the final phase of the exemplary humanitarian solution to the problem of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico would be successfully completed in the very near future.

37. Mr. GÁNDARA GABORIT (Observer for Guatemala), congratulating the High Commissioner on her re-election, said his Government had had an opportunity to appreciate her human qualities when she had visited Guatemala the previous year to assess progress in the reintegration of returnees.

38. During the escalating armed conflict in Guatemala in the 1980s, thousands of citizens had been displaced internally or had sought refuge in Mexico. On behalf of President Arzu, he thanked UNHCR and the Government of Mexico for the valiant efforts they had made in conjunction with the Guatemalan Government to complete the process of integration, return and reintegration of some 62,000 displaced Guatemalans. Some 40,000 persons had been repatriated and reintegrated in Guatemala and Mexico had permitted some 22,000 Guatemalans to settle in the country. The world should take note that it was possible to find a lasting solution to the refugee problem and to provide for the neediest of those who had been driven from their homes by armed conflict.

39. The Guatemalan Government had negotiated with the representatives of the people to ensure their return in conditions of dignity and safety. Agreements had been concluded to give the process support and credibility. As announced at the previous session of the Executive Committee, the repatriation process was in its final phase. It was estimated that some 2,500 persons would return from Mexico before the end of the current year and some 500 more were expected in 1999. Guatemala was concerned that the final phase was jeopardized by the fact that UNHCR needed an additional US$ 3 million to implement its repatriation programme in the region.

40. The Peace Agreements signed between the Government of Guatemala and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca on 29 December 1996 had paved the way for a return to normal conditions of life in Guatemala. A major effort had been made by the Guatemalan Government, with the support of the international community, to fulfil the obligations thus incurred. The authorities had been working tirelessly to improve living conditions, particularly by providing support for health, education and basic infrastructure projects. A Government with clear aims and the interests of the people at heart was capable of forging the alliances needed to carry out its mission. Funds for social investment, the promotion of peace, environmental protection and housing had been consolidated and over US$ 400 million had been invested as a result on behalf of the neediest communities in Guatemala.

41. Following the establishment of the National Committee for Aid to Refugees, Returnees, and Displaced Persons (CEAR) in 1986, the National Fund for Peace (FONAPAZ) in 1991 and other public bodies under the 1996 peace agreements, it had been necessary to raise over US$ 200 million to operate and coordinate the sectors involved in return and reintegration activities. In

addition, the Government had made available over US$ 30 million from tax revenue for land purchases. Those activities had been recognized as unique by the international community, since persons displaced by other armed conflicts were usually relocated to areas without proper conditions, particularly in terms of legal security in relation to land.

42. President Arzu's Government had recognized the need to provide land for returnees and had made major efforts to negotiate and identify appropriate sites. Landowners had sought to obstruct the process by setting exorbitant prices. However, all problems had eventually been solved through negotiations and transparency and practically all returnee communities now had a place to live. To promote reconciliation among Guatemalans, steps were taken to resolve the conflicts generated by demand for land by internally displaced persons and the farming population. The Presidential Office for Legal Assistance and Dispute Settlement in Land Matters and the Land Trust Fund played a very active role in that connection.

43. As existing resources had proved insufficient to ensure compliance with the peace agreements, the Government wished to thank the international community on behalf of the people of Guatemala for their offerings and support. He urged friendly countries to maintain their support at the next meeting of the Consultative Group in Brussels, bearing in mind that documents reviewing progress in implementing the peace agreements were currently being prepared. In that connection, he stressed the importance of mobilizing the resources needed to reintegrate returnees and displaced persons, a major responsibility for all concerned in view of the importance of facilitating a gradual transition from the status of impoverished peasant to that of successful entrepreneur. The promotional programmes were designed, in particular, to achieve a multiplier effect in regions where settled communities lived side by side with a displaced population.

44. The peace process had opened up new opportunities for large sectors of the population. While it would have been extremely difficult to achieve the desired objectives without international cooperation, the Guatemalan people were the main actors and must persist in their endeavours to ensure a stable and lasting peace.

45. His Government thanked UNHCR for its assistance over the past 15 years and its investment of over US$ 50 million in projects to help the needy and to promote and build peace.

46. Mr. BRYLLE (Denmark) warmly congratulated the High Commissioner on her re-election. The energy that she invested in her work for the protection of refugees deserved the highest praise.

47. He expressed deep sympathy with the families of UNHCR staff members who had been killed under tragic circumstances and offered sympathy and support to the family of Vincent Cochetel, who was still in custody. He shared the hope that his safe release would be secured without delay.

48. He associated himself with the statement by the representative of Austria on behalf of the European Union.

49. The document on international solidarity and burden-sharing (A/AC.96/904) clearly showed the linkage between international responsibility to protect refugees and concerted action to achieve that aim. Denmark had carried out a comprehensive study on the concept of burden-sharing, taking into account the views of receiving States, academics and UNHCR, which he hoped would serve as an input for future discussions.

50. The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, particularly the principle of asylum, were predicated on the fulfilment by the international community of its obligation to protect refugees in a spirit of international solidarity. Many countries, not least in the developing world, were hosting large numbers of refugees and displaced persons. The associated social and environmental burden and political impact could not be overestimated and the international community must recognize the serious problems that host countries faced and the special contribution they made.

51. Support for the aims and purposes of UNHCR, particularly in the form of financial contributions, was a way of demonstrating a solid commitment to international solidarity and burden-sharing. The Danish Government was committed to contributing 1 per cent of annual gross national income to development aid, including humanitarian aid. Subject to parliamentary approval, it would shortly contribute an additional 54 million Danish kroner, bringing its total contribution for 1998 to the equivalent of approximately US$ 43 million, a slightly higher figure than in 1997. Denmark thus remained one of the largest donors to UNHCR.

52. An important lesson learned from recent conflicts was that an effective response to the impact of conflicts was difficult in the absence of an overall strategy. The international community must respond more quickly and comprehensively to impending or existing situations of mass displacement in order to prevent or alleviate suffering, provide more adequate protection and limit the costs for receiving countries.

53. The need for concerted action in Kosovo was obvious. The High Commissioner's recent report demonstrated the seriousness of the situation and the need for a lasting political solution. Denmark supported efforts to ensure that UNHCR was in a position to provide protection for the large number of displaced persons and refugees, many of whom were facing winter in the mountains without adequate shelter, food and health care.

54. Arrangements for specific situations must be flexible enough to meet broad humanitarian concerns. Burden-sharing must encompass all stages of a conflict or distress situation, beginning with the definition of preventive measures and ending with rehabilitation and repatriation. Denmark strongly agreed with the European Union and UNHCR that the fundamental protection obligations of States were unconditional. The fulfilment of obligations could not be made contingent on solidarity and burden-sharing.

55. Coordination was crucial when conflicts had escalated to the point of generating refugees. The existing appeal system could be improved and, in that connection, he welcomed the strengthening of the role of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The Consolidated Appeal

Process (CAP) contributed to a process of burden-sharing in which United Nations organizations dealing with humanitarian issues, social development, human rights and security worked closely together on the basis of an agreed division of labour. The international community should discuss ways of strengthening that mechanism.

56. Burden-sharing mechanisms were also lacking in the final phase of conflicts. The successful return and reintegration of refugees in post-conflict situations called for an efficient combination of humanitarian aid and development assistance to enhance the local capacity-building needed for reconciliation. The problem of bridging the "transition gap" needed to be addressed in a system-wide and coherent way.

57. The strong public interest in the report of the Board of Auditors (A/AC.96/901) should be viewed as a natural expression of interest in humanitarian assistance. Denmark had been pleased with the speed and openness of UNHCR's response to press criticism in that regard. The key to full credibility was openness and transparency. Contributions by member States to the funding of UNHCR were routinely scrutinized by parliamentary committees and auditors. A transparent and open UNHCR would assist member States in counteracting misunderstandings and contributing to public awareness of the complexity of UNHCR's work. In that connection, he welcomed the High Commissioner's announcement that a review of capacity and methods in the area of evaluations was being undertaken and trusted that the review to lead to a reform of evaluation policy to ensure that more evaluations were carried out by independent bodies and that the public was given access to all evaluation reports. UNHCR must act on the auditors' recommendations. He assumed that follow-up would be discussed in due course by the Standing Committee.

58. It was essential to ensure that women's and children's needs were adequately taken into account in the formulation and implementation of programmes.

59. UNHCR was doing an admirable job under very difficult circumstances and Denmark assured the High Commissioner and her staff of its full support.

60. Mr. LEBEDEV (Russian Federation) said that international solidarity and burden-sharing were fundamental principles designed to alleviate the suffering of displaced populations and to ensure mutual support among States when displacement became a destabilizing factor and had an adverse impact on regional and international security.

61. The globalization process, the new character of contemporary crises and the acuteness of current forced migration problems made it imperative to develop effective mechanisms for the promotion of international solidarity and burden-sharing. The promotion and protection of human rights, including those of refugees and displaced persons, called for a concerned effort by all States, a position reaffirmed in 1993 in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

62. International solidarity, based on strict compliance with international law, was a mutually beneficial tool for dealing with major humanitarian problems, an insurance against risks and challenges and an influential factor

in the historical process. The Russian Federation believed that solidarity should serve as a regulator for non-violent methods of addressing humanitarian issues, thus promoting stability in a multipolar world. His country knew from experience that the use of force to deal with complex problems only aggravated tension and created new problems.

63. An important feature of solidarity was its non-political nature, although it did incorporate a deep sense of morality. Solidarity could not be demanded: each State decided when and how to show solidarity with a neighbour in need and that was a measure of its sense of responsibility.

64. It was on that basis that the Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States, held in Geneva in 1996, had adopted a Programme of Action proclaiming a combination of the paramount responsibility of the receiving State and the supplementary principle of international solidarity and had established a mechanism for burden-sharing.

65. The migration situation in Russia remained complicated: more than 5 million displaced people had moved from the CIS countries and the Baltic States into Russia since 1992. As of 1 July 1998, around 173,000 persons had been recognized as refugees and 966,000 as forcibly displaced persons. In addition, there were more than 700,000 illegal immigrants. The June meeting of the Steering Group of the Conference had examined the situation and participants had said that a successful solution depended on striking a fair balance between the principle of responsibility and solidarity, and the actual States concerned. The balance appeared, however, to have remained one-sided. Despite recognition of the acuteness of the situation at the forty-eighth session of the Executive Committee, UNHCR's support for Russian projects was still set at $10 million, even though Russia's federal expenditure alone had doubled to $230 million.

66. The latest developments in the world financial crisis had further complicated matters in Russia and social tensions were running dangerously high. Some aspects of the Federal Migration Programme had been suspended and that was expected to have a negative impact on migrants. In such circumstances, there was an urgent need for international solidarity with a view to keeping the reforms on track, as the new Government was fully determined to do. The contribution of the international community to solving the problems of forced migration would certainly help ensure the success of Russia's democratic transformation.

67. Russian efforts to press ahead with reform helped to prevent the expansion of forced migration flows towards other countries and it was regrettable that they were underestimated and that interest in the migration problems of the CIS countries had waned. His delegation expected the Executive Committee to make a decision to implement the Programme of Action, which would serve as a real reference point for strengthening international solidarity and burden-sharing in that area.

68. He expressed gratitude to the management and staff of UNHCR, who tried to maximize existing possibilities despite difficult financial and political

conditions. The Russian delegation sympathized deeply with the tragic abduction of Vincent Cochetel. Everything possible was being done to ensure a prompt release and he hoped those efforts would meet with success in the very near future.

69. Mr. BÕSENBACHER (Hungary) said that, since it was often the absence of human rights guarantees that caused mass exoduses and displacement, the most effective way to deal with the problem of refugees was through human rights policy. However, while Governments were accountable for violations of international human rights standards, human rights could no longer be considered an exclusively domestic matter, but were of legitimate concern to the international community. Human rights action that was taken as part of preventive peace-building, in order to strengthen the rule of law and civil institutions, non-governmental organizations and the media, might avoid man-made disasters, the collapse of Governments and the outbreak of conflict, and thus protect those in danger of displacement. The most practical, satisfactory and durable solution to the problem of protection was to provide temporary protection followed by voluntary repatriation with international monitoring of returnees' safety, thereby enabling the State to resume responsibility for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of its own people.

70. For millions of refugees, the right to seek asylum was a precondition of their enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms denied elsewhere. In that context, he was pleased to report that Hungary had withdrawn its geographical reservation to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. That meant that non-European asylum-seekers could now directly approach the Hungarian authorities rather than the Budapest office of UNHCR and that Hungary was now able to meet its international obligations on a non-discriminatory basis. Parliament had also recently enacted asylum legislation laying down procedures regulating refugee status determination, accommodation, support, data processing and supply, as well as establishing various categories of protection. His delegation was grateful to UNHCR for its cooperation in formulating and implementing the Asylum Act. Mandate refugees who had been granted protection by UNHCR before 1 March 1998 had had three months to apply to the Hungarian authorities for recognition as refugees. That process had been completed in formal terms, but individual cases had not yet been examined. Continued financial and intellectual support from UNHCR in the future would assist Hungary in preparing for membership of the European Union. In that regard, European Union experts were for the first time helping to train Hungarian decision makers and officials, thanks to support from UNHCR and the European Union's Odysseus programme.

71. Meeting the challenges of today's humanitarian crises required tight coordination among international organizations, in a spirit of solidarity and burden-sharing. One example of such coordination had been the meeting held in Budapest in 1995 in preparation for the Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States, which had addressed the question of regional cooperation on migration. Mechanisms for burden-sharing should be established on a regional basis, with flexible criteria according to the political, economic and social conditions of the States involved. To be

effective, such mechanisms should make it possible for countries not directly affected to participate in receiving refugees. Nevertheless, burden-sharing could not be a prerequisite for solidarity or for States' fulfilment of their obligations to protect refugees.

72. The number of asylum-seekers from Kosovo arriving in Hungary continued to increase and Hungary alone could not ensure their satisfactory protection. He welcomed the inclusion of the issue on the agenda and his delegation wished to help formulate and implement recommendations aimed at solving the burden-sharing problem.

73. Mr. MOHAFA (Lesotho) said that political instability in his country was causing great difficulties. Armed supporters of the opposition, which had accused the Government of election fraud, had taken the law into their own hands and brought chaos to the streets of the capital, Maseru. The situation had come to a head when the Lesotho Defence Force had mutinied, making it impossible to restore law and order and forcing the Government to appeal to its neighbours for assistance. South Africa and Botswana had sent a small contingent of soldiers to restore law and order and ensure sufficient stability for constructive dialogue. The situation had in fact stabilized and begun to return to normal.

74. In the meantime, however, large numbers of foreign and local residents had fled into South Africa. Their plight was serious, but had not yet reached crisis proportions. More than 1,600 Basotho and around 400 foreigners were still outside Lesotho and had been provided with temporary housing by arrangement with the South African authorities. The Government now faced the difficult task of repatriating those who had fled and assisting others who had been affected by the violence. He called urgently on the international community for humanitarian assistance because the destruction of the infrastructure had led to the collapse of the country's disaster relief mechanism and it was proving difficult to cope.

75. Lesotho urgently needed help in drawing up a coordinated plan of action, in repatriating those who had fled into South Africa, in providing temporary accommodation for the internally displaced and in organizing the distribution of emergency supplies, particularly food and medicine.

76. Lesotho had itself offered humanitarian assistance to displaced people in the past. As a result of the positive political developments in South Africa, the numbers of people seeking asylum had fallen sharply in recent years and the Refugee Coordination Unit had ceased operating in 1993. Recently, however, the Unit had been revived and was currently helping to coordinate Government departments in matters relating to asylum-seekers. In addition, it ensured that refugee issues were dealt with in accordance with international instruments. An interministerial committee had also been set up to coordinate the screening of applicants for refugee status.

77. Apart from economic refugees and illegal immigrants attempting to reach South Africa, who continued to present problems, the number of refugees in Lesotho was very low and most of them were employed. There was a small emergency fund, but no special budget for refugees and a sudden influx would create immediate problems.

78. Lesotho was committed to the protection of asylum-seekers, all of whom were granted asylum as long as they satisfied the conditions of the 1951 Convention and its Protocol and the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. There was no geographical limitation and there had been no incidents of refoulement. Nevertheless, despite its small number of refugees, Lesotho requested UNHCR support for capacity building.

79. Mr. NEGROTTO CAMBIASO (Italy) said he shared the High Commissioner's view that flexibility and predictability of funds were important for effective action and the timely delivery of programmes. In addition, his delegation fully endorsed Austria's statement on behalf of the European Union, but would like to make some comments based on Italy's experience.

80. Italy supported the adoption of an integrated approach to the refugee problems of Central America within the CIREFCA framework and through regional human development programmes. It had also played an important role in peace-building in Mozambique and in creating the conditions for repatriating refugees. Together with other countries, Italy had also undertaken comprehensive reconstruction action in Albania, aimed at preventing further mass exodus, and had repatriated, in safety and dignity, those who had already left, granting full access to asylum procedures.

81. Italy attached great importance to international solidarity in moral, financial and political terms and to broad international commitment to alleviating the suffering of millions of refugees, which jeopardized what in many parts of the world was a fragile peace.

82. Host countries shouldered the greatest burden in assisting refugees. Since most of those were developing countries with scarce resources, the concrete support of the international community was fundamental. Prevention in the form of political and diplomatic action to resolve conflicts and guarantee human rights and support for economic and development cooperation in reducing poverty and social injustice were vital to any strategy of international solidarity and burden-sharing.

83. A comprehensive approach to humanitarian crises - from prevention to the post-conflict phase - required the participation and coordination of actors at the local, national and international levels. In particular, his delegation hoped that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) would help correct the deficiencies in the coordination of United Nations agencies and organizations, a step that would improve resource utilization and relieve UNHCR of some of the tasks, especially reconstruction activities, which did not come under its mandate, but which it was forced to carry out because of the insufficient role played by other organizations. He expressed appreciation for UNHCR efforts further to promote the participation of non-governmental organizations, which represented one of the most advanced manifestations of civilized society.

84. Burden-sharing mechanisms should be implemented at the regional level, where mutual knowledge - and therefore a common understanding of the problems - made it easier for countries to cooperate effectively. Such a focus would not in any way detract from efforts at the national and

international levels, and indeed could boost them. Moreover, regional cooperation could facilitate a revaluation of the role of UNHCR, which could be limited to covering unmet needs, thereby freeing resources and time to deal with emergencies.

85. Lastly, his delegation called on the international community to redouble its efforts to increase security and protection for humanitarian personnel, who were paying too high a price in the performance of their duties.

86. Mr. BILUKHA (Observer for Ukraine) said that a refugee problem had arisen in Ukraine following the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the ensuing military conflicts and interethnic tension. A law adopted in 1993 had established special administrative departments to deal with migration and refugees and, in February 1996, a procedure for the processing of asylum applications had been instituted. That service currently operated in 21 Ukrainian regions. As of 1 July 1998, there were 2,931 refugees in Ukraine, of whom 1,017 were children under 16 years of age. Some 80 per cent of the refugees were from Afghanistan, although 48 different nationalities had been recorded.

87. When it had begun its work, the migration service used to grant refugee status to 80 per cent of all applicants, compared with approximately 40 per cent at the present time. Economic migrants were barred from claiming refugee status under Ukrainian law. Despite its economic problems and the tighter immigration policies of its Western neighbours, Ukraine was still a desirable destination for refugees from a number of politically unstable countries. Over half of all refugees in Ukraine wished to stay in the country on an extended or permanent basis.

88. His Government therefore faced enormous problems in terms of integrating refugees into Ukrainian society. A number of questions remained unresolved. Owing to the acute financial crisis in the country, there were no plans to offer material assistance to refugees until 1999, nor had any accommodation been made available to them. Much work remained to be done in terms of refining relevant legislation and putting it into practice. In that connection, a revised and updated law on refugees was being drafted which would reflect world experience and the practical results of the legislation currently in force. Ukraine was also looking at the possibility of acceding to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

89. UNHCR had provided technical assistance to the Ukrainian migration service, helped to open a reception centre for refugees, trained Ukrainian staff and supplied teaching and information material. The Ukrainian authorities had taken account of UNHCR's wide experience of dealing with refugee problems all over the world and had followed UNHCR recommendations in framing legislative instruments.

90. UNHCR had also helped to integrate refugees through the payment of special integration grants. Together with non-governmental organizations, it had implemented programmes to provide them with facilities, medical assistance and the opportunity to learn Ukrainian. UNHCR efforts had been so successful that there were plans afoot to open regional offices throughout the country.

91. An important area of UNHCR's work in Ukraine was connected with the return and resettlement of people who in the past had been deported because of their ethnic origin. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, a total of 3 million people had been deported from Ukraine. To date, more than 260,000 returning Crimean Tatars had been resettled in the Crimean Autonomous Republic, a migration that had caused many problems for the Ukrainian Government. Since independence, Ukraine had invested approximately US$ 300 million on housing and infrastructure projects for the returning Tatar population, as well as setting aside land for future returnees. Considerable efforts had also been made to provide a cultural and educational infrastructure for the Crimean Tatars.

92. Ukraine had taken a number of practical steps to secure the backing of donor countries, international organizations and charities for its repatriation and resettlement programmes. All assistance was gratefully received. While it was true that significant problems remained, his Government was nevertheless confident that the international community endorsed the concept of controlled migration into Ukraine, which would not only satisfy Ukrainian interests, but would also contribute to international stability in the wider context.

93. Mr. PRIETO CASTRO (Spain) said that, while endorsing the statement made on behalf of the European Union, he wished to comment on some aspects of the annual theme that were of particular interest to Spain.

94. Burden-sharing and international solidarity were complementary imperatives that went beyond the basic principle that host countries were primarily responsible for protecting and assisting refugees and returnees. The coordination of international efforts by UNHCR was particularly important in situations of mass influx and also of large flows of people who in all fairness should be given international protection, even though they were not covered by the 1951 Convention.

95. Spain's concern to receive and protect persons fleeing from various kinds of conflict, whether in large groups or individually, and who were not necessarily eligible for recognition as refugees under the 1951 Convention, had led to the amendment of the Asylum Act in 1994.

96. Although the thematic paper prepared by UNHCR highlighted a number of regional initiatives, conceptual precision was essential in addressing the issues of burden-sharing and international solidarity. There was a wide range of situations in which States had to deal with requests for protection. For those persons who came within the scope of the 1951 Convention and were in need of international protection, States had a duty of non-refoulement, regardless of the situation. That category should include those who needed temporary international protection, without prejudice to the recognition of refugee status. It was a different matter, even in cases of mass influx, when the applicants were not entitled to international protection because their applications were clearly unfounded and displacement had occurred for reasons other than the persecution referred to in the 1951 Convention and regional instruments.

97. European Union efforts to devise burden-sharing mechanisms were conceptually distinct from its moves to rationalize and allocate responsibility for flows of persons across the external borders of the Union. The Dublin Convention was a basic instrument for determining where responsibility for examining asylum applications lay, in order to avoid asylum-seekers being passed on through a series of instances, in violation of their right to have their application considered and ruled upon.

98. Consideration should also be given to the development of systematic early warning mechanisms with a view to sharing the burden of reception and temporary residence. The European Council had indeed adopted a decision in 1995, calling upon UNHCR to take on a basic role in early warning procedures. At the same time, there was a need to strengthen other mechanisms relating to preventive diplomacy, peace-building and the promotion of economic and social development in the context of the defence of human rights, an area to which Spain gave high priority and to which it had devoted considerable effort. In that way, Spain complied with UNHCR recommendations to attempt to eliminate the causes of mass population movements. Equally important was the establishment of conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation, as exemplified by efforts in the former Yugoslavia. Flexibility was essential to any international solidarity or burden-sharing initiative, including the principle of differentiated responsibility, that would allow States to respond according to the situation, taking account of all the specific factors at work in a given flow of refugees.

99. Mr. ZAHRAN (Observer for Egypt) said that African countries had taken the lead in initiating a form of solidarity and regional cooperation to solve the problems of refugees and displaced persons and to alleviate the burdens on those host countries which had been swamped by refugees. The 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa had called for burden-sharing and solidarity to resolve precisely that issue. Greater attention should be paid to the African refugee crisis and the associated political, economic, social and environmental problems of developing countries which had been forced to take in large numbers of refugees for extended periods.

100. There had been a regrettable decline in the volume of donor contributions and pledges made to international organizations and specialized agencies working in the humanitarian field, including UNHCR. His Government therefore urged donor countries to continue to offer financial and material support to enable UNHCR to fulfil its humanitarian role. Such contributions should not be linked to unrelated conditions; all States should pay their annual contributions to the regular budget of the United Nations in order to ensure that adequate funds were available to carry out humanitarian mandates.

101. His delegation was uncomfortable with the idea of implementing projects that would enable refugees to become self-reliant in their host countries. Such projects would contradict the temporary nature of refugee status and might result in local people having to compete for work with refugees, thereby fuelling unemployment and resentment.

102. Of particular relevance to the question of international solidarity and burden-sharing in respect of refugees was the financial crisis which was

besetting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and was severely affecting that agency's capability to carry out its responsibilities to Palestinian refugees who had been forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring Arab States. UNRWA would require continuous financial and technical assistance and support until a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian problem had been found and the return of all refugees and displaced persons had taken place. His delegation therefore called on the High Commissioner to ensure the closest possible cooperation with UNRWA.

103. Africa was still plagued by a number of conflicts that generated refugees and displaced persons. Greater efforts were needed to find political and humanitarian solutions. In the former Yugoslavia, by contrast, the Dayton Peace Agreement had led to a remarkable improvement in the situation of refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the international community was still obliged to provide the necessary conditions for the voluntary return and reintegration of refugees by accelerating the process of bringing to justice persons accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The "Open Cities" policy would also be of enormous help to refugees. For its part, Egypt had made continuous efforts to help victims of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to participating in the international forces in Bosnia, Egypt had organized fund-raising campaigns, fulfilled all the pledges it had made at donor conferences and built a school and a hospital in Sarajevo and an orphanage in Mostar.

104. The protection of refugees and UNHCR field personnel would be considerably enhanced by the speedy signing and ratification of the Statute for an International Criminal Court. In that connection, his Government deplored the killing and kidnapping of humanitarian relief workers.

105. Mr. GANEGAMA-ARACHCHI (Observer for Sri Lanka) said that the distinction between humanitarian and political factors in some refugee crises remained unclear. A correct understanding of that reality was essential when discussing protection, assistance, solution and prevention. The complexity of refugee crises necessitated a flexible approach based on clear-cut neutrality and humanitarian considerations. Enhanced burden-sharing arrangements and increased international solidarity could only strengthen and develop UNHCR's capacity to meet current and future challenges.

106. Terrorists and human traffickers frequently abused the institution of asylum and international law relating to refugees. UNHCR had been in the forefront of dealing with migrations of people who had been displaced as a result of terrorist violence. Abuses by traffickers of human beings (such as international criminal organizations and terrorist groups) greatly limited the space available for genuine refugees. Criminal and terrorist groups merely used asylum-seekers as a way of raising funds abroad.

107. Recent United Nations initiatives on terrorism had signalled the danger clearly. All States had a duty to suppress terrorist groups operating out of countries of asylum and to curtail their fund-raising activities. International burden-sharing should include action to combat human traffickers, pooling of information and intelligence, better screening

procedures and deterrent action against terrorist groups and front organizations engaged in fund-raising. Such measures should be implemented in tandem with ad hoc national containment programmes and UNHCR special programmes.

108. Internationally agreed action against illegal human trafficking and fund-raising would not undermine the 1951 Convention regime. On the contrary, such measures would be an essential ingredient in making optimal use of UNHCR's ad hoc assistance programmes which were tailored to specific situations and designed to contain, minimize or eliminate contrived population outflows.

109. While a more systematized burden-sharing mechanism could result in administrative or institutional efficiencies, one of UNHCR's main strengths was the ad hoc nature of its arrangements and its ability to adapt to widely differing situations. Systematization should not be pursued at the expense of flexibility. The UNHCR Special Programme in Sri Lanka, for example, was associated with a very important humanitarian aspect of the Government's overall strategy of mitigating the effects of terrorist-initiated violence and promoting a negotiated political solution to the ethnic issue in the country.

110. Mr. SOMOL (Observer for the Czech Republic) said that asylum statistics in the Czech Republic had converged with similar indicators in other European Union States. The influx of asylum-seekers had stabilized. Most refugees were of non-European origin. The number of refugees from southern and eastern Europe had declined. The recognition rate was between 4 and 5 per cent.

111. His Government's policy was to reform asylum institutions and procedures and to introduce fairer, faster and more transparent mechanisms consistent with European Union standards. Since 1 October 1998, responsibility for processing asylum applications had been transferred from the police to the Ministry of the Interior. A special asylum appeals commission would be established shortly.

112. Significant new asylum legislation was being introduced. The new law, which had been drafted in accordance with UNHCR recommendations, would provide a framework for quicker processing of applications and flesh out existing procedures for the integration of recognized refugees.

113. Other steps towards the harmonization of asylum procedures and institutions were outlined in the National Programme for Accession to the European Union, which was due to be implemented by the year 2003. The programme made provision for the completion of the reform of asylum institutions and the specification of asylum procedures at airports, for example, in respect of undocumented aliens. In that connection, an exchange of information with the European Union, other States, UNHCR and other institutions would be useful.

114. Mr. NJADDER-BEDAYA (Observer for the Central African Republic) said that the Central African Republic would continue to play a role in dealing with the aftermath of refugee crises and, in that connection, his Government was very grateful to donor countries and various agencies of the United Nations for

their help in enabling the Central African Republic to shoulder its share of the refugee burden. While always willing to act as a host country, the Central African Republic was also eager to deal with the root causes of refugee flows through the promotion of peace and harmony.

115. His country's recent experience of hosting Rwandan refugees had not been happy. Although most of the Rwandans living in camps in the Central African Republic were genuine refugees, their behaviour as a group left much to be desired. They had been responsible for a number of murders, including those of two policemen. Fortunately, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the first country in which they had sought asylum, had expressed a willingness to take them back.

116. His Government was also counting on the help of the international community to turn the sites of vacated refugee camps into new towns with running water, thereby arresting the drift of the local population from the countryside. In addition, the stringent measures imposed on the Central African Republic by the Bretton Woods institutions had hampered the country's efforts to help itself.

117. Finally, African Governments had a duty to show solidarity with one another and cooperate closely to ensure that the misery and suffering occasioned by refugee crises was not repeatedly visited on the continent.

118. Mr. GONZALEZ (Argentina) said that Argentina's applications for asylum had tripled in recent months, demonstrating the unpredictability of refugee flows. Since 1985, when it had established its Committee on Refugee Status, the Argentine Government had been fully assuming its responsibilities under the Convention, in close cooperation with the regional UNHCR Office for Southern Latin America. That cooperation went beyond a mere selection process and included support for action aimed at helping refugees in critical situations in other regions. As part of its burden-sharing effort, Argentina had increased its support for the UNHCR Regional Office in Buenos Aires through different Government-sponsored programmes designed to assist United Nations missions working in the region.

119. Another indication of Argentina's determination to share the refugee burden was its participation in the training of special peacekeeping bodies and of the "White Helmets". It also helped to organize courses, seminars and workshops in technical and humanitarian law training for national and foreign officials. Other initiatives, on a selective basis, included the Government's agreement to resettle a group of refugees from the former Yugoslavia, which the High Commissioner had kindly mentioned in her opening statement.

120. To the best of its ability, Argentina prepared and trained its own human resources and cooperated with UNHCR in peacekeeping and assistance activities that were, for the most part, extra-regional. A large-scale dissemination effort and the ongoing establishment of discussion forums were also ways in which it reciprocated the assistance which many inhabitants of the region had received in the past.

121. Mr. AMAT FORES (Observer for Cuba) said that the theme of the 1998 session provided a valuable opportunity to explore some of the positive and

negative factors connected with the refugee issue. Disturbingly, a few industrialized countries continued to question the refugee status itself. The proliferation of anti-immigrant legislation, the closing of borders and growing restrictions for asylum-seekers must be at the core of any serious approach to the situation of refugees in the modern-day world.

122. At the same time, consideration must be given to the root causes of the major refugee crises: internecine wars, inter-ethnic conflicts, denial of the right to self-determination (as in Palestine), chronic underdevelopment and extreme poverty. Those problems, which were mostly internal in nature, were inherited from the colonial past with its exploitation of third world peoples, arbitrary delimination of borders, political upheavals and the regime of economic exploitation imposed by liberalization.

123. The discussion paper contained in document A/AC.96/904 confirmed many of his delegation's views. Responsibilities must be shared in a world where the unequal distribution of wealth, structural inequalities and prevailing international economic disorder prevented the disadvantaged from coping with any such challenges without international cooperation.

124. Cuba had been closely following the work of the High Commissioner on the topic under review and other issues. Despite its difficult economic situation, it was prepared to continue its support for that important humanitarian work.

125. Mr. DECAZES (Observer for Malta) said that the theme for 1998 reflected the complexity of the refugee issue, which included political, economic, social, educational, legal, environmental and security aspects. Malta, which enjoyed a special status under public international law, felt especially concerned by the subject. Faithful to its long tradition of humanitarian assistance, it implemented short-term and long-term assistance programmes for the benefit of displaced populations throughout the world, with special emphasis on the medical and public-health side.

126. Maltese assistance teams were currently operating in several African, Asian and European countries. In the Great Lakes region, Malta's German association, "Malteser Hilfsdienst", took part in repatriation and rehabilitation operations in addition to its medical projects. It had been necessary to suspend those activities because of the instability in the area, but they would resume as soon as conditions permitted. In order to enhance its humanitarian work in Africa, Malta had recently opened a regional office in Uganda.

127. In the economic sphere, Malta conducted assistance programmes in the food, transport and water supply sectors, helping to strengthen local infrastructures and public services.

128. In Bosnia, Malteser Hilfsdienst continued to cooperate with UNHCR in conducting an assistance programme for female war victims, the Bosnian Women's Initiative. In Kosovo, where the situation was deteriorating daily, a Malteser Hilfsdienst team had recently conducted an evaluation mission

throughout the region. Malta was hoping to open an office in Montenegro, and its future projects included medical assistance to displaced persons and a shelter-construction programme to prepare for the winter.

129. Despite its limited resources and lack of territory for hosting refugees, Malta did its best to participate in international solidarity with an emphasis on humanitarian assistance. To that end, the statutes of its emergency body, the Emergency Corps of the Order of Malta (ECOM), had been amended to extend its work beyond the emergency stage.

130. Mr. JAKUBOWSKI (Poland) said that more than 22 million people throughout the world were assisted mainly, if not exclusively, by UNHCR, whose personnel often served under extremely difficult and dangerous conditions. He joined the previous speakers who had demanded the immediate and unconditional release of Vincent Cochetel.

131. The theme for 1998, international solidarity and burden-sharing, was one of special significance to Poles, who had required international protection themselves in the not-so-distant past. Poland had recently adopted a new bill on aliens, which introduced the principle of equal rights and obligations for foreigners and citizens. The new bill had been drafted in cooperation with UNHCR; it was in full conformity with international legal standards and took emerging trends in Europe into account. Although Poland was not yet a country of destination for large numbers of refugees, those who chose it enjoyed full economic and social rights and a significant effort was made to integrate them into Polish society. He was not speaking of economic migrants, who caused harm to convention refugees by abusing procedures.

132. Poland was developing regional cooperation with its neighbours on questions relating to refugees and enjoyed excellent working relations with Germany and Ukraine.

133. As many non-European countries in the world had achieved stability, democracy and development, Europe should not necessarily be the main destination of refugees. More countries in the world must share the refugee burden, to allow asylum-seekers to seek protection as close to their countries of origin as possible. The advantages of that approach were manifold: easier integration into the receiving society, closer contact with relatives and an easier return to the country of origin when protection was no longer needed or, in the case of war refugees, when the conflict came to an end.

134. Poland fully accepted its share of the refugee burden and, as its economy progressed towards stable and significant economic growth, it was increasingly better prepared to meet its international obligations.

The meeting rose at 6.45 p.m.